

CONTROLLING PANIC ATTACKS: GOOD TECHNOLOGY, BAD THEORY¹

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Coping with Panic was written by a clinical psychologist who has personally experienced panic attacks; the book is intended for the edification of individuals suffering from panic disorder and its sequelae conditions, such as agoraphobia, certain circumscribed phobias (e.g., heights, flying, highway driving, shopping, etc.), and some instances of generalized anxiety disorder. This book is but one of a number of similar self-help manuals for anxious persons that have appeared in the past few years (e.g., Agras, 1985; Babior & Goldman, 1990; Goldstein & Stainback, 1987; Handly & Neff, 1987; Seagrave & Covington, 1987; Swede & Jaffe, 1987). Billed as a practical manual, the book can be divided into two major sections: The first is descriptive and educational in nature, and the second presents strategies for preventing panic attacks and aborting them once they begin. These divisions present similar strengths and weaknesses, each being an amalgam of fact and fiction, blending empirically supported information and poorly supported speculation in an uncritical melange.

Clum does a fine job in presenting descriptive information about the clinical phenomenology of panic attacks consistent with the current formulations found in the DSM-III-R (American Psychiatric Association, 1987). The association between panic attacks and agoraphobia is nicely laid out, and contemporary findings about the prevalence of these conditions are described. Several useful questionnaires and self-monitoring scales are presented that are intended to be used by the reader for self-diagnosis, for taking baseline information about the frequency and circumstances associated with panic

attacks, and for evaluating changes in panic attacks over time. So far, so good.

Clum runs into problems with his uncritical presentation of common beliefs about panic attacks as if they were proven facts. For example, it is claimed that panic attacks "... develop out of a background of psychological stress" (p. 10), that "psychological factors that can trigger panic include conflict with others or within yourself and acute or chronic stress" (p. 19) and even less ambiguously, "Stress is *always* involved in the onset of panic" (p. 27). Current available evidence certainly does not permit such strong assertions regarding the etiology of panic attacks, even if they are congruent with common sense and pop psychology. As a self-help manual oriented towards the trade market, *Coping with Panic* shares the common failing of being long on anecdote and short on critical analysis with supportive references.

One consequence of attributing panic attacks to "stress" is that, in common with most so-called "cognitive therapies," the subsequent focus in treatment becomes the client's private events, such as irrational self-statements, belief systems, self-efficacy, mistaken attributions, and catastrophic thinking. Much effort (and many pages) is devoted to assessing and changing these private events, effort that from the perspective of the behavior analyst is misplaced. If assessment reveals that the client is experiencing a stressful environment, the behavior-analytic principle of "treating what is felt, not the feeling" suggests that the client be assisted in reducing the stressful circumstances in that environment, rather than in developing mental coping techniques.

Despite this shortcoming, I suspect that persons who experience panic attacks will find this book helpful. It is useful to learn that much is known about this mysterious behavioral phenomenon, and that a number of effective psychosocial interventions

¹ Review of: Clum, G.A. (1990). *Coping with panic: A drug-free approach to dealing with panic attacks*. Belmont, CA: Brooks/Cole.

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have been relatively rigorously investigated and found useful for many persons. Among these are exposure therapy, training in proper breathing, specific medication regimens, and relaxation skills. As a book describing therapeutic technologies, *Coping with Panic* is a useful guide, even if the underlying theory may eventually be shown to be incorrect. I suspect that most behavior analysts will find Isaac Marks' *Living with Fear* (Marks, 1978) a more palatable presentation of self-help techniques for panic sufferers. Paradoxically, I also suspect that most panic sufferers will find Clum's presentation to be a rational, common-sense, and, in some ways, more comfortable book to read. Both detail effective methods of overcoming panic attacks and related avoidance behavior, and both could be of value to the behavior analyst working with clinically anxious persons. As an example of treatment technology, *Coping with Panic* is a useful addition to the behavior analyst's bookshelf. As a theoretical contribution, it disappoints.

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